

Point of View

To Martha: Post 2/27/72 Thanks for The Memories

By Mary Russell

Martha Mitchell, we'll miss you. While it's true you're not entirely "gone with the wind," nevertheless, your days as an official Cabinet wife are over, and the wife of President Nixon's campaign director just won't have the impact the wife of the Attorney General did.

So in these times of instant nostalgia, we're already remembering fondly your early morning telephone calls, your blasts at Sen. Fulbright, your castigating of peace protesters, your three-inch stiletto heels and your Scarlett O'Hara dresses.

And we salute you.

You infused a shot of adrenaline into a good gray Republic administration. Before Henry Kissinger you were. And while you startled us, stunned us, outraged us sometimes, you also gave us a glimmer of light-heartedness in those days which followed the upheaval of the '60s, which seemed so grim, so full of anger, frustration and hopelessness.

But there was more than that. While you scorned women's lib, you made it pretty plain that you believed in being anything but submissive. "Outspoken" was used so often before your name it became a cliché.

And while you scorned the hippies and the peace freaks, you were pretty anti-Establishment yourself. You refused to curtsy to the queen of England, you protested when the President didn't put a woman on the Supreme Court and you said flatly you didn't want your husband to leave the Attorney General's job to work on the campaign. You also wore a style of clothing that was distinctly non-conformist, and if anybody didn't like it that was too bad.

But in each case, it was not what

you said or what you did, but the sheer bravado of your doing it that lent you that special something that turns a public figure into a very human, and more often than not, likeable being.

And it is in this sense that we hope you've started a trend, perhaps even something so exalted as a tradition.

Because the wives of Cabinet members, congressmen, diplomats and sometimes even First Ladies have tended to treat their roles very delicately. Early on in their husband's careers they were told that everything they did reflected on their spouse's image. And so public officials' wives have tended to rein in, to go out of their way to appear "normal, proper wives."

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MARTHA, From F1

And this sanitizing of image also leads to a very sterile image — of women who never get runs in their stockings, never burn the roast, never scream at the kids, never drop a teacup.

In the extreme, it leads to absurdity. It leads to Pat Nixon saying she has NEVER had a quarrel with her husband, and NEVER throws away any of those countless plaques pressed upon her in the course of campaigning. In short, the perfect wife is the plastic wife and so dehumanized one can't feel much about her one way or another. For in order to love or to hate, the public can only react to what is human, not to what is a fabricated image.

You proved that a wife can not only be human, but at times outrageous, and the world doesn't fall apart, the government does not collapse and, in fact, your husband's career doesn't suffer. Well, not too much anyway.

Official wives, and particularly those whose husbands are running for President this year, might take a cue from that. Not that they should all go about popping

off about everything, God forbid. But just that it won't matter if a little human frailty shows. Being tired, angry, depressed or whimsical IS normal and we'll forgive you if some of it shows.

In fact we'll identify with you. It's what we voters feel all the time.

As for you, Martha Mitchell, you brought to the obfuscating world of Washington what Archie Bunker brought to television—the kind of tension—releasing laughter that comes from recognizing how funny we all are.

Right on, Martha.